Happiness and its Effects on Children

Dr Scott Bolland
Graduate School of Business
Queensland University of Technology
Overview

- A brief introduction to positive psychology
- What is happiness, and why was it invented?
- The effects of happiness on children
  - The centrality of happiness on learning
- How do we do happiness?
- A cautionary tale on happiness
- Happiness and a world of possibilities
Section 1:
A Short Introduction to Positive Psychology
Positive Psychology

- It is the science of “what makes life worth living”
- Began as a new era in 1998, by Martin Seligman
- A reaction to the “disease model” of psychology
- Aims to help build thriving individuals, families and communities.
Positive Psychology

Psychological wellbeing

Help people "flourish"

Positive psychology

Traditional psychology

Psychological disorders
Section 2: What is Happiness and Why was it Invented?
On Emotions

- emotions are essential to survival
- they motivate us to act in useful ways:
  - flee in fear
  - avoid physically painful experiences
  - attack in anger
  - disgust is associated with the urge to expel
- But what is the purpose of happiness?
On Happiness

- Negative emotions = avoid
- Happiness = approach
- Associated with dopamine & endorphin release that shape behaviour
- Ecological Success ~ Happiness
On Happiness

- Ecological Success ~ Happiness
Section 3:
The Happiness Advantage
The cart and the horse

- Most people think they would be happy if they had \(<x>\). I.e. they think that success brings happiness.

- Much research has shown the opposite...
- If you are HAPPY you are more likely
to be successful!

- Happy kids are likely to be successful adults!

- Most people put the cart before the horse (think about childhood report cards)!
The cart and the horse

Best to think of happiness as a useful companion on your expedition to the summit.

You are unlikely to reach the top if you hate the climb!
The happiness advantage

Lyubomirsky & King, 2005

- Looked at 200 scientific studies
- Found that happiness engenders success in nearly EVERY domain of our lives:

Health, friendship, community involvement, creativity, jobs, careers, marriage, businesses.
Take home message

• If you are happy, you think and behave in a way that engenders success in NEARLY EVERY ASPECT of your life

• E.g., happy sales people do better, because they behave and are perceived differently (are rated as being more approachable and trustworthy)

• It PAYS to be happy!!!!
Section 4: The How of Happiness
Happiness in Children

- According the US studies
  - The rate of increase of depression among children is an astounding 23% p.a.
  - Pre-schoolers are the fastest-growing market for antidepressants. At least four percent of preschoolers -- over a million -- are clinically depressed

- Why???
How do we do “Happiness”? 

- Most people have an idea of what is needed to be happy, and set their goals accordingly 
  - I.e. if I had <X> I would be happier/ more fulfilled: 
    ◦ More money? 
    ◦ Losing weight? 
    ◦ Nice car? 
    ◦ Looking younger? 
    ◦ A larger house with an extra bedroom? 
    ◦ A new job that better provides for you and your family? 
    ◦ A more attentive spouse? 
- These beliefs are taught to our children.
How do we do “Happiness”? 

Most people THINK they know what happiness is, and how to do it.

If I had <x> I would be happier

But are we right?
A million dollar question

If you WON $1 million dollars, would you be happier than what you are now?

If you became paralyzed as a result of a car accident, would you be LESS happy than what you are now?
Happiness and Success

- Lottery winners and accident victims: is happiness relative? (Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978))

- Compared 22 lottery winners (7 of which had won > 1 million), 22 controls, 29 paralyzed accident victims
Happiness and Success

- Lottery winners and accident victims: is happiness relative? (Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978))
- Compared 22 lottery winners (7 of which had won > 1 million), 22 controls, 29 paralyzed accident victims
Happiness and Success

- Lottery winners and accident victims: is happiness relative? (Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978))
- Compared 22 lottery winners (7 of which had won > 1 million), 22 controls, 29 paralyzed accident victims
Happiness and Success

• Success does not MAKE you significantly happier!

Hedonic adaptation – humans have a tendency to quickly return to a baseline level of happiness despite major positive or negative events

Hedonic Treadmill – we will always want more than we have
How do we do “Happiness”? 

- Most people have an idea of what is needed to be happy, and set their goals accordingly.
- I.e. if I had <X> I would be happier/ more fulfilled:
  - More money?
  - Losing weight?
  - Nice car?
  - Looking younger?
  - A larger house with an extra bedroom?
  - A new job that better provides for you and your family?
  - A more attentive spouse?
- Unfortunately, these beliefs are taught to our children.
How do we do “Happiness”?

“How we believe would make a huge difference in our lives actually, according to scientific research makes only a small difference…”

(S. Lyubomirsky)
The Happiness Pie

- **Hedonic adaptation** – only partially correct!
- YES – you habituate to significant events back to a set point
- BUT – you can change that set point:
  - 50% of happiness is genetic
  - 10% is situational
  - 40% has to do with skills that can be taught / learned (intentional activity)

(Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005)
Gratitude/Optimism, Engagement, Meditation / Savoring the moment, Accomplishment

Positive Relationships

Exercise, Diet, Sleep

Meaning/ Purpose/ Values
Example Strategy: Practicing Gratitude
The Monkey Business Illusion

Daniel J. Simons
Practicing Gratitude

- Humans have a limited “spotlight of attention”
- But we can “choose” what to focus on
- Take the time to reflect on the good in your life!
3 good things exercise

- Every day for the next 2 weeks – keep a journal of 3 good things that happened to you, and the role that you played in making them happen
- The more you actively practice looking for good things, the more you will see in your everyday life
3 good things exercise

happiness

- pre-test
- post-test
- one week
- one month
- three months
- six months
Example Strategy: Cultivate Optimism
Cultivating Optimism

- Optimists generally outperform pessimists in nearly all aspects of life:
  - Mental health (optimists are happier and less depressed)
  - Achievement
  - Health
  - Etc.

- Pessimism is an Epidemic!

- Optimism can be taught to children!

The Optimistic Child: A Proven Program to Safeguard Children Against Depression and Build Lifelong Resilience (Seligman, 1995, 2007)
9 year old Alex auditioned for a solo in the choir, and didn’t get it.

I really suck at singing! I will never get a solo! This is a waste of time!

I feel depressed and angry. Turns down other opportunities to audition.

Having pessimistic thoughts about the situation can lead to behaviours that undermine your success!!!

Training yourself to see things through a more optimistic lens can help you persevere and succeed!
Adversity

9 year old Alex auditioned for a solo in the choir, and didn’t get it.

Belief

I really suck at singing! I will never get a solo! This is a waste of time!

Consequence

I feel depressed and angry. Turns down other opportunities to audition.

Dispute

I am 3 years younger than the girls who generally get the solos, and they have had more practice.

Energization

Keep going, and keep trying. With practice comes competence and success.
Take Home Message

• How you perceive a situation is important!
• Pessimism can undermine success by disrupting motivation
• Correcting these perceptions (through consciously challenging negative self talk) is one of the keys to happiness AND success
The pleasure of learning
The pleasure of learning

- Learning is central to our happiness
- Endorphins are released when we actively explore new experiences
The pleasure of learning

- Things that are too familiar are BORING!

- Things on the periphery of our knowledge are pleasurable and addictive!

- Things that are too novel are AVERSIVE!

Think about:
- Social Conversation / Facebook
- Movies
- Food
Broaden and Build

- exploring on the periphery of your knowledge is how we “broaden and build” – i.e. how competencies evolve! …
Becoming a Barbie Expert

- Scenario: a 4 year old girl at the video store, selecting a video

Familiar
(e.g., Barbie and the magic of Pegasus)

Novel
(e.g., Charlie and the Chocolate Factory)
Becoming a Barbie Expert

- Scenario: a 4 year old girl at the video store, selecting a video

Familiar (e.g., Barbie and the magic of Pegasus)  ➡️  Barbie and the magic of the rainbow  ➡️  Novel (e.g., Charlie and the Chocolate Factory)

Nb: learning new information in a domain of interest, leads to competence!!!!
Why do Children Play?

- Babies start by having little knowledge about the world (the effects that their actions will have) – so behave randomly
- But in doing so, they start to form a world model
- Generally, random actions, have little effect on the world
Why do Children Play?

• However, sometimes there are violations to this rule
• Such violations are less familiar, and hence more pleasurable – and are then preferred
Why do Children Play?

- However, sometimes there are violations to this rule
- Such violations are less familiar, and hence more pleasurable – and are then preferred
Why do Children Play?
Why do Children Play?
Broaden and Build

- Endorphin release (i.e. happiness) follows an inverted U-shape with respect to familiarity.
- This “happy” signal, is central to our survival, motivating us to learn more about ourselves and environment.
- i.e. learning (experiencing new information) is central to happiness AND success !!!
The pleasure of learning

• Kids are natural learners
• We enjoy exploring on the periphery of knowledge
• This self-directed learning leads to competencies that are central to our success
• Creating an environment that allows children to actively explore, is one of the best things you can do for their education, happiness and success
Section 5:
A Cautionary Tale on Happiness
A Cautionary Tale on Happiness

- We are stone age creatures living in a jet age zoo

Natural habitat

Current Reality
Section 6:
Happiness and a World of Possibilities
Happiness and the world of possibilities

Technology + Pleasantness
Engagement Relationships
Achievement ➔ purpose
“The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be ignited”

- Plutarch
Thank you for your time!